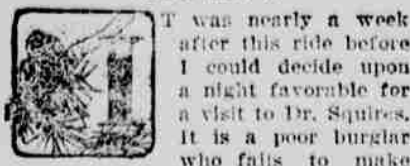


PROFESSIONAL BRETHREN

BY GEORGE E. WALSH

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CHAPTER I.

It was nearly a week after this date before I could decide upon a night favorable for a visit to Dr. Squires. It is a poor burglar who fails to make careful preparations before attempting to enter a house, and long experience in my business has made me extremely cautious. I never undertake a job without due consideration of all details. A sneak thief may go around from house to house in an aimless sort of manner and enter the first one that is not properly barred, but not so with a professional.

John always sent me off to exercise the horses on the few days when Mr. Goddard did not use them, and I employed these spare moments to acquaint myself with the surrounding country. I passed Dr. Squires' house several times in the course of the next few days, examining the premises with a critical eye.

I found that the house was located some distance back from the main highway and that it was nearly concealed from view by shade and fruit trees. A small grove of woods backed up to it on one side and an open pasture field bordered it on two other sides. The easiest and safest approach to it, I conceived, was from the wood side.

The house itself was an old-fashioned thatched mansion sadly in need of paint and general repairs. It was gloomy enough to drive almost anybody away from it after dusk, and I did not wonder that strange stories of ghosts and spirits had been gossiped around by the country people. If I had been a superstitious person, I should have selected the house as the last one to rob. It was probably this idea that had influenced the doctor in taking it for his workshop. He was pretty safe in assuming that nobody would disturb him in that lonely retreat.

I obtained leave to go to the city on Friday afternoon, and I told John not to worry if I did not appear until the following morning. I had friends in the city who might detain me over night.

About 4 o'clock I left the barn and started presumably to walk to the city. John offered to drive me half way down if I would wait until after supper, but the afternoon was so fine I preferred the walk.

Two miles down the road I found that I was perfectly concealed from view of every house, and I quietly slipped over the fence into the woods. This piece of woods I knew backed up to Dr. Squires' house. I concealed the bundle which I pretended that I wanted to take to the city with me, taking enough looks from it to answer all my present purposes.

As I approached the edge of the woods I moved with great caution. I did not know how many servants the doctor had, although John had assured me that he had only one, a copper-colored Indian who was more foreign looking than his master. This servant never associated with anybody else and was either deaf and dumb or unable to speak English.

He was a sort of faithful watchdog, I judged, whom the doctor had befriended and who would in consequence give up his life for him if necessary. I had not such zealous man-servants before, and my experience had always been that they are exceedingly troublesome. I therefore used extra precaution.

While yet some distance from the house I climbed up into the leafy branches of one of the large trees and, pulling the foliage to one side, scanned the house intently through a pair of silver netglasses. By the aid of I could note everything that was going on outside the house and could almost see objects inside the windows.

The only advantage I obtained from this was a clearer idea of the most vulnerable points of the house and also the way to escape from the premises in the event of an alarm. I saw the servant go about his duties, and later I secured the most accurate information in regard to a dark, broad, thickset, well-proportioned man, and one who would prove a bold and powerful antagonist. More than this I could not say until I found myself at closer quarters with him.

I remained in my treetop position until well after dark, watching everything that occurred around the house. Then I descended to the ground, ate a few pieces of cold meat and bread, drank a little wine and threw myself on the dry leaves to sleep. There was no danger of being discovered in the woods, and I needed the rest and sleep to prepare me for the night's work.

It was shortly after midnight when I opened my eyes again. Habit had made it a second nature with me to awaken at this hour, and I had no fear of oversleeping myself when I first closed my eyes. I crawled through the underbrush toward the fence which divided the doctor's land from the grove, and then waited and listened. The house was perfectly dark, and everything was calm and peaceful.

I had thought of dogs, but had failed to see any around in the afternoon through my glasses. However, to make sure of it I initiated the cry and snarl of a cat—a noise that always brings watchdogs away from their post of duty. If the dogs were inside the house, I would find that out later. But I really saw no reason why dogs should be kept on the place.

Satisfied that the coast was clear, I made my way toward the house, keeping well in the shadow of the trees. Then I made a close examination of the windows and doors. They were locked with old-fashioned catches and re-enforced with nails. I selected the doctor's study as the place least likely to be occupied.

CHAPTER II.

As I took the piece of glass out of the glass pane, making an opening large enough to insert the hand, I worked so carefully that the diamond point scarcely made any of the grating noise so common when one operates with cheap cutters. This one had been made specially for me, and it was perfect in every detail.

As I took the piece of glass out of the glass pane, making an opening large enough to insert the hand, I worked so carefully that the diamond point scarcely made any of the grating noise so common when one operates with cheap cutters. This one had been made specially for me, and it was perfect in every detail.

Nothing could be heard of an alarming character, and so I proceeded to unfasten the window and to open it.

Now, I had been in the city or the house had been a modern one, I should never have thought of opening that window without searching for a burglar alarm, but out in the country, miles away from any assistance and in such an antique house, I did not see the value of a burglar alarm and consequently never once gave it consideration.

I discovered my mistake in an instant, however. I had not raised the window half an inch when there were a ringing of bells and an electric buzz all through the house that made me turn pale. An amateur might have thought that all the ghosts and spirits of the dead had suddenly come to life again, but I was too familiar with that sound to be deceived.

I was off the piazza in half a minute. Quick as I was, however, a flash of light in the windows of the house beat me. The alarm had lighted every electric light in the rooms, and the old mansion was in a brilliant blaze.

Even at this critical moment, when all my faculties should have been alert, I made another mistake. Instead of seeking safety in the woods as fast as my legs would carry me I waited to see further developments. Would the doctor and his servant come out and search for me? I laughed softly to myself at the idea. Certainly they could not expect assistance from another house inside of half an hour. Then what was the burglar alarm for? To frighten robbers away; that was all, I concluded.

But I changed my mind a moment later when I heard the quick patter of steps that I knew did not belong to human beings. Two black objects came rushing down the lawn from the barn, and in the semidarkness I made out two enormous dark hounds. The object of this burglar alarm flashed across my mind in an instant.

The electric wire that had started the bells to ringing had also released the watchdogs, and they were now upon me.

As if by instinct they rushed upon the piazza, catching the scent almost immediately. But in that instant I had turned and fled toward the woods, my only place of safety. Could I reach the woods and climb a tree before they caught up to me?

This question flashed through my mind, but I could not answer it. I already heard their feet behind me, striking the ground with heavy patters as they leaped rapidly across the intervening space.

The blood seemed to rush to my head, and for an instant I thought of death. I had never been cornered quite so completely before. I gathered up my strength for a final effort and cleared the fence with a bound, but as I leaped upward the foremost Dane made a tremendous lunge and cleared the top rail of the fence in five style.

We both landed on the other side, but the force of the hound's leap carried him several feet over my head. Before he could turn upon me I had cocked my revolver, and as he made a savage dive toward me I exploded it full in his face. The range was so short that the explosion must have partly stunned him, for he rolled over and kicked a few times and then lay quite still.

But I had no time to prepare for the second one. As if angered by the sight of his dead mate he sprang upon me with a snarl that I can remember to this day. The great red, round felled jaws were close to my face, and I drew back with a helpless shudder. I could have yelled in fear then if professional pride had not tied my tongue. I bowed to receive my fate, determined, however, to sell my life dearly.

But before the white teeth could close upon me I saw a flash of something over the hound's head, then I heard a sharp crack and a fork of lightning. It made a curve downward and then disappeared, but it had left its mark behind. I felt great spurts of hot blood pouring from the Dane's throat on my hands and face, while the brute rolled over with an angry growl.

I jumped to my feet and saw facing me, with the bloody knife in his hand, Mr. Goddard. For an instant I was speechless and almost helpless, but his warning voice brought me to my senses.

"You have only a few minutes to escape. They are coming. Run!"

I heard footsteps on the lawn back of us, and remembering the athletic form of the doctor and his faithful bodyguard, I obeyed the words of my master and hurried from the spot, but when I turned to look for my deliverer I found that he had disappeared too.

CHAPTER VI.

It was daybreak before I recovered from my fright, cleaned my clothes of the blood and dirt and returned to my quarters in the barn. John was not up yet, and when he finally came down to the stable I was busily engaged in grooming the horses. The experience of the night had left me a trifle pale and agitated, for in all my experience I had never been quite so near death's door. But John's was an unsuspecting nature, and I had nothing to fear from him.

"You're an early bird to get back so soon in the mornin'," he said, "an' your work half done, too, before breakfast."

"I got a lift most of the way out," I answered. "I caught a milk wagon coming this way."

"I don't hear of no milk wagons. Now, if that had been me I'd tramped all the way an' never met a soul unless it was somebody to hold me up."

"Hold you up?" I said disdainfully. "A man of your size and age afraid of being held up by highwaymen?"

"I never have been, but there are so many burglars goin' on round here that it makes me feel creepin' like I'm out on the road after dark."

"I don't hear of no burglaries," I replied, "none except that of the Stetson mansion the day before Mr. Goddard engaged me."

"Well, you haven't heard everything then. That was the fifth or sixth in four weeks, an' they have had four more houses entered since then."

This was genuine news to me, and I was interested. John continued: "They are sick ones, too, for they never leave any trace behind them. These detectives from the city don't seem to be able to do anything. They must come from the city over night an' get back again afore mornin'."

But they can't find any of the stolen goods—not in any of the pawnshops. It's a fine mystery to be a hangin' over the place. You can't tell which house will be robbed next. The servants are all talkin' about leavin', an' nobody feels safe. I ain't sayin' that I'm not glad that I'm livin' out here over the barn instead of in the house. They never bother the stables, an' I suppose I'm all right."

"But you'd go to Mr. Goddard's assistance if an alarm was given at night?" I said.

"I ain't employed for that," John replied evasively, shifting his eyes from object to object. "I've got a wife an' child to look after, an' there ain't no reason why I should get killed to save my master a few dollars."

"No? Well, I'd go as soon as I found he was in trouble."

"Well, you haven't anybody dependent upon you," he answered.

"That's true," I then added: "You say most of the houses around here have been entered in the last month or two. Has Mr. Goddard's been robbed?"

"No; his an' Dr. Squires are 'bout the only ones that haven't been robbed."

"That's curious," I reflected aloud. "Not at all. We expect the robbers any night here, an' that's why the servants all threaten to leave. The robbers wouldn't take the trouble to break into Dr. Squires, for there ain't nothin' in that old place to take. He's too poor to have anythin' valuable around."

Breakfast at this juncture interrupted John's talk, and we had no chance to renew it that morning. But about noon the subject was recalled to me rather suddenly by the appearance of Mr. Goddard. He looked troubled and dissatisfied. He came into the barn dressed in his ordinary morning smoking jacket.

"John, I've got to make some change here," he said. "My butler has become frightened over the recent robberies and won't stay, and the rest of the servants are up in arms too. They all talk of leaving. I must have some man-servant in the house who isn't afraid of every little sound and ready to jump at his own shadow. Now the question is, Who shall I install there?"

He looked significantly from John to me.

"I have a family to look after," John began to stammer, and as he spoke a look of annoyance swept across Mr. Goddard's face.

I did not let him finish, for I knew that he would only get himself into deeper water by displaying his cowardice. As a good, faithful coachman and kindly husband John was a success, but as a man of courage he was a total failure.

"If you have no objections, sir, I would like to offer myself as one willing to live in the house and look after things," I said modestly. "I don't think you will find me afraid of anything, or anybody that may attempt to enter your house at night."

I could not help noticing a pleased expression on his face, although at first I expected he would resent my intrusion. I recalled the old, but sometimes erroneous, saying that "there's honor even among thieves," for in spite of what he knew about me he was willing to trust me. There was certainly a very peculiar relationship springing up between us.

"Thank you, William," he answered. "The change will be agreeable to me. You will have quite a responsible position, and I will have to trust much to your honesty and tact until this burglar scare passes away. It seems strange that the gang of thieves can't be caught. I would give considerable money for a reward just to break them up, for they are making the life of our neighbors miserable out here."

"Do you think that there is a gang of them?" I asked boldly.

"Certainly," he said, without hesitation. "How else could the robberies be committed with such success? Why have you any reason to believe otherwise?"

He looked sharply at me, and my eyes wandered from his as I answered: "No, except that I believe a gang could not operate as successfully as one good skilled professional robber. Where there are too many one or more will get into trouble sooner or later, and they will squeal upon the others."

"That's very true, very true," he said reflectively. "I had never thought of that, and yet, yes, Jenkins, the detective, came to that conclusion some time ago, but I scouted the idea. May be there is more in the idea than I thought. I will think about it, and if such a man is really terrorizing the neighborhood I should like to see him captured. I believe I will offer a reward myself for his capture."

"It would be a good idea," I replied. "For you would probably never have to pay the reward."

"Why not?"

"Well, because a man sharp enough to evade detection all this time is not likely to be caught by somebody working to get a reward."

"That may be, but I shall offer the reward at once. I'll make it a thousand dollars for the man's capture and another thousand for his conviction."

"That ought to be sufficient to tempt any confederate to squeal and turn state's evidence."

"I might be, but I should hate to see a confederate for it. It is my private opinion that a man who tells of his confederate in crime for a reward is worse than the man who is captured. He is not only a criminal himself, but a coward and traitor."

Mr. Goddard's eyes flashed sharply as he spoke, but I turned away without further remark. I knew for whose benefit the words were spoken. Did he think for an instant that I would turn traitor and claim the reward which he had offered for his own capture and conviction? And yet how easily I could do it? He had placed himself in my power, and now he seemed to challenge me upon my honor to betray him.

But, then, he had saved my life once, and he undoubtedly knew human nature well enough to satisfy himself that I should be no danger of my betraying him. He had in reality made a coup d'état in rescuing me from the fangs of the savage Dane the night before. He could easily have stood aside and let the hound finish me, placing me beyond all possibility of ever afterward annoying him, but his interference, coupled with my sudden change of position which brought me daily in closer contact with him, convinced me that he wanted to use me for some purpose. Either he had some object to attain through me or he wished to make me his confederate in order to dispose of the goods he must have collected, for I had no doubt that the series of robberies in the neighborhood had been committed by him.

What his purpose was I felt curious to know, and I looked forward to future developments with considerable interest.

CHAPTER VII.

I FOUND my new position much more to my taste than the one I had been serving in. I had complete command of all the silver and valuables of the house, and it was a satisfaction to look at all this wealth even though I had no right in any of it. The curious circumstance that I should be placed as a guard over so much treasure amused me and induced speculations in my mind about the uncertainties and inconsistencies of life. A man of my profession must of necessity be something of a philosopher. How else could he accept the continual risk of capture and conviction and silence all qualms of fear and conscience when engaged on delicate and dangerous jobs? There are ups and downs in every life, I suppose, but none more so than in that of the professional burglar.

The second day of my installation as butler in the house was marked by an interesting event. Dr. Squires and Miss Stetson both appeared at lunch.

This meeting was not premeditated by my master. It was apparently purely accidental.

About noon the two visitors appeared at the house on horseback. My master did not seem to mind, for he was smoking in his dressing room when the clatter of horses' hoofs on the hard, gravelly drive attracted his attention. I was passing through the room at the time, removing the remnants of a late breakfast.

"Who's that coming, William?" he asked.

I was near the window and, looking out, replied:

"Miss Stetson, sir, and I think the man they call Dr. Squires. I've never met him, but from what John said I judge it is."

A sudden exclamation from my master interrupted me, and I turned in time to see his face deathly pale. He recovered himself immediately, however.

"Dr. Squires and Miss Stetson, you say?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then with admirable composure and with great tact he said:

"Oh, yes; I forgot to tell you, William, that they were coming here to lunch today. Have a good lunch for them at 2."

Then he hurriedly changed his coat and appeared in the courtyard in time to greet the guests. Through the open doors I could hear their voices.

"How do you do, Charles? Ready for early visitors? I didn't believe you were up yet?"

It was the loud, gruff voice of the doctor. Then a feminine voice said apologetically, I thought:

"Good morning, Charles! I was out riding this morning with my man, and we met Dr. Squires. He insisted that we should come around here. So I consented provided he would promise to make you go off for a ride with us."

"Yes, that was the agreement, and to make my word good you must get ready now."

"Well, I hadn't thought of going out this morning, but I will accompany you if you will both agree to come back here and take lunch."

"That's the man of business," laughed the doctor. "He exacts a fee for everything he gives. He won't even ride with us, Miss Belle, unless we swear to return and lunch with him. Well, as for my part I agree to it, for Charles always tempts me with his good lunches."

I could not hear the replies as they moved into the parlor, but I knew enough to convince me that my master was very sensitive about his jealousy of the doctor, and that not even to me would he admit it.

A few minutes later I saw them

going off together, Miss Stetson riding a fine roan, with the doctor mounted on a black.



"Good morning, Charles."

on a fiery, coal black steed on her right and my master on her left with his white Arabian mare. It was a spectacular sight to watch them, knowing as I did something of their lives. I wondered which she would select in the end—the black or the white?

Promptly at 2 they returned, a little fatigued by the ride, but jovial and in excellent spirits.

When the doctor came into the dining room, I scrutinized him carefully. He gave me no particular notice, and this left me time to myself to examine him. My distant view through the field glasses had been pretty correct, but on closer examination he revealed the most distinct features of his face—his coal black, brilliant and restless eyes. These eyes never laughed, not even when he was convulsed with merriment. They were always cold, penetrating and, as I thought, sardonic. They seemed to repel and fascinate at once. They easily dominated everything that came under their sway.

He was talkative and lively to a degree, forming the life of the party, but the eyes that so attracted seldom took notice of me. An uncontrollable desire to have them centered on me for an instant to fathom their meaning seized me. To accomplish this I spilled some of the salad dressing on his coat sleeve.

He turned a wrathful look at me, and I had one long, steady gaze into those eyes. So intent was I that I forgot to be confused at my mishap. The incident occupied only a minute, but in that short space I had read the character of the man.

"What sort of servants do you have here, Charles?" he broke out savagely when the dressing filtered down from his coat sleeve to the floor.

My master looked annoyed and quickly answered:

"He is a new man, doctor, and you must overlook this accident."

The conversation flowed on freely after that, and the mishap was soon forgotten.

When the wine and cigars were brought, they retired to an open balcony just off the dining room. Through the open window I could still hear their talk. Most of it was of those conversational topics that I forgot to be confused at my mishap. The incident occupied only a minute, but in that short space I had read the character of the man.

"By the way, Charles, you spoke of a friend of yours having a couple of Dane hounds for sale. Can I secure them for a nominal price?"

"Yes, I can get them and make you a present of them. But why do you want two more? You have two of the finest Danes I ever saw."

"Have I not?" ejaculated both my master and Miss Stetson.

"No; they are both dead," replied the doctor slowly.

"Why, how is that? What killed them?"

"They simply died. My man overfed them, I imagine, and they both died yesterday of convulsions."

"How strange," I said.

"No, not strange at all. I told my man that he would kill them if he fed them too freely while they got no exercise."

"You don't think he poisoned them?" asked Miss Stetson.

"No, certainly not. I attended them when they were sick and cut open their bodies afterward. There was no sign of poison in their stomachs."

Then he made arrangements with my master to secure the two hounds from his friend.

I did not listen to the descriptions of the new hounds or to the terms of the agreement. My mind was more concerned about the doctor's reason for concealing the attempted robbery of his house. Why did he lie about the death of the two Danes and why did he not report the facts of the case to the police? These were questions that I could not disguise from my mind, although I tried to be convinced that it was natural for such a man as Dr. Squires to hush up anything like a sensation. It would only attract people to his workshop, which he wanted to keep quiet and exclusive.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE visits of Dr. Squires at my master's house were not as frequent as I could wish for my purpose, but this did not by any means argue that they did not meet often. On the contrary, I found that Mr. Goddard had almost daily meetings with the doctor in his office and that the latter was subjecting him to a course of treatment for the mysterious disease that had been inherited from past generations. Curiosity to know what this complaint was and what Dr. Squires was prescribing for its cure possessed me, and (like my other acts of inquisitiveness) I determined to satisfy it upon the first possible occasion.

About a week after the occurrence just related I was called into my master's room. He had not yet risen from his bed, and I knew by the pallor of his face that he was not as well as usual.

"William, I want you to take a note for me around to Dr. Squires. I can't keep my appointment with him this morning."

"Yes, sir," I said, waiting for him to give me further instructions.

He closed his eyes for a moment as if wincing from some secret pain.

"I do not feel like writing," he said a moment later. "You can take a verbal message. William, can't you?"

"Certainly. I will repeat it word for word."

"Well, I believe you are to be trusted. I have taken a great fancy to you. My other man I never felt that I could trust, and if he had been honest, he was always so stupid that he would get everything mixed up. But I think you are gifted with more than ordinary intelligence."

I simply bowed my head and made no comment.

"And as modest as intelligent," he added, with a faint sign of a smile. "Some day maybe you can help me in a higher way than at present."

"I should be delighted to do anything for you, sir," I answered sincerely. "You will find me faithful enough to trust with anything—secrets or anything."

He looked long and inquisitively at me and then said, with the most imperturbable smile on his face:

"Do you know that I sometimes fancy I've seen your face somewhere before—that is, before you came into my employment."

I knew that this was a test question, and I answered it accordingly:

"Probably. We often meet faces by chance in the world and forget them until reminded of them by some later incident."

"Yes, true. You're quite a philosopher, too, William."

"Enough to accept life as it comes without a demur," I answered.

"Well, that is more than I can do sometimes. But to return to business. You know that I have appointments with Dr. Squires nearly every day. Well, this is one of the mornings, and I do not feel energetic enough to keep it. Go and tell him that I cannot come before tomorrow. If he sends me an answer back, remember it and tell me. That's all."

He dropped his head back upon the pillows and closed his eyes. I withdrew as quietly as I could.

I took one of the horses from the stable which John said needed exercise, and I cantered slowly down the road toward the doctor's house. As I approached I looked with interest at various objects that had become indelibly impressed upon my memory from the experience of that eventful night when I attempted to enter the house. I had by no means given up all idea of exploring the interior of the haunted house, but was merely postponing the second trial for a more opportune time. Meanwhile everything about the premises assumed some special importance to me.

I wished very much to see the interior of the house in the daytime, and I determined to force an entrance at all hazards in delivering my message to the doctor. I feared the doctor would come outside on the piazza or that his servant might insist upon taking the message in to the doctor. To avoid this, if possible, I stopped some distance from the place, hitched my horse to a tree and approached the house on foot, keeping well in the shadow of trees and shrubberies to prevent anybody seeing me.

I succeeded so well in this ruse that I reached the piazza without being discovered. The bell, which I rang, echoed throughout the gloomy interior of the house so discordantly that it made one think of ghosts and departed spirits. I seemed to hear the scurry of footsteps, as if the bell had given the alarm to innumerable rats and mice, but a moment later I was satisfied that the noise was made by human feet.

The doctor's servant—a dark, dried up specimen of a man from India—glided toward the door, making the scuffling noise with his sandals. The man's eyes were small and beadlike, and his arms and fingers were long and bony, but they were nevertheless strong and active. He shuffled toward the door with an anxious look on his face. He was evidently disturbed by the thought that somebody had approached the house without attracting his attention.

He refused to open the door more than a foot and stood there making a guttural sound as if trying to ask my errand.

"I have a message for Dr. Squires," I said.

He stuck out a long, bony hand as if to take the letter which he supposed I had. At least he could hear and was familiar with the English language. I also believe that he could speak and that his dumbness was merely pretended. But there is a way to make a man speak. If he doesn't want to, or at least not under ordinary circumstances, in a civilized country.

"It is not a letter," I added as he held out his hand for some time. "I have a message to deliver—a verbal message."

He shook his head and withdrew his hand.